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STATEMENT ON ***THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:***
2014 U.S. History, Geography, and Civics

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Too often, subjects in the social studies realm take a back seat. There's much emphasis these days on STEM — science, technology, engineering, and math — and even the language arts. Of course, those subjects are important, but subjects like history, geography, and civics are equally important. I've taught world history and geography for nearly a decade, and I've found that learning about the major historical events and changes over time, the countries of the world and their inhabitants, and the fundamentals of government and responsibilities of citizenship all contribute to today's students being well-rounded contributors to society — now and in the future.

The Nation's Report Card is the nation's representative measure of student achievement in U.S. history, geography, and civics. Today's results show that there hasn't been a statistically significant increase in any of these three subjects since our last assessment year of 2010, and there have been no significant changes in the geography scores for eighth graders since the first assessment year of 1994.

Still, there has been improvement over the long haul in history and civics — and that is encouraging. Since 1994, the first year of the NAEP U.S. history assessment, the average score for eighth graders has increased by 8 points. And compared with 1998, the first year of the NAEP civics assessment, the average score for eighth graders has increased by 4 points.

How do we maintain improvement and increase achievement over time? A significant key is how students are taught and how they learn. At my middle school in Alabama, we have what's called a flipped classroom model. For those who may not be familiar with that concept, flipped learning brings interactive engagement to classrooms by having students learn content online, usually at home, and homework is done in class with teachers and students discussing questions and solving problems. Teacher interaction with students is more personalized, and it can be seen as offering more guidance than lecturing.

Say we're studying the rain forest in my geography class. Even before starting the lesson, I'll ask my students to watch a video clip, download a webinar, or peruse a website — giving them material that lets us start the class with a two-way conversation, not one-way instruction.

I also am a big user of resources through the History channel. It often has short videos on many subjects, and I have had my students pull up a link and watch a program on a topic that we will learn in class. So instead of the classroom discussion being teacher-centered, students take more ownership of their learning, and they come to class more prepared and eager to do research on their own.

A recent example of making knowledge interactive was a deeply personal experience. I have a friend named Emmanuel who is a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda. He came to speak to my class, and others in the United States, to tell his story of surviving such a horrific tragedy and to talk about the history of his country. I met him while studying education policy in Rwanda, where I also was involved in a National Geographic documentary about the genocide.

Beyond hearing Emmanuel's stirring story, my class used our school's computer lab to visit the website of the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda — a treasure trove of resources, including oral histories from survivors. They learned so much about the geography of the region, including how people, events, and culture shape the dynamic there.

As seen in these examples, an important part of this learning foundation is digital technology — and I don't mean just using or viewing PowerPoint. More student-centered technology can bring scores up and encourage kids to explore beyond what they would through a typical lecture.

The contextual variables in the NAEP U.S. history, geography, and civics assessments demonstrate this increasing use of technology. Through all three subjects, there is an interesting trend: The percentage of students who reported reading from a textbook at least weekly was lower in 2014 than in 2010. However, over these four years, we see higher percentages of students engaging in related activities such as watching movies or videos, using a computer at school for their subjects, and listening to information presented online. Students are clearly absorbing information from other sources beyond textbooks and classroom discussions.

Using interactive means will be an important method to get students more excited and interested in their subjects, and hopefully increase performance in the process. Digital technology can allow students to engage more deeply in history, geography, and civics, and develop more critical-thinking skills to help them reach their full academic potential. Interactive and technological components also can help enhance the overall rigor of the subject disciplines.

How something is taught makes as much difference as what is taught. More forward-thinking instruction and learning can make a difference in academic achievement in U.S. history, geography, and civics — important subjects that I am grateful NAEP recognizes and will continue to assess in the future.